# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

Many of you have doubtless heard of Mass Observation. It is the creation of a group of enthusiastic young sociologists who want to know what is actually appening in society and going on in people's heads. They have more than twenty hole-time observers working in two units of observation—one a northern town and the ther a London borough ; and in addition two thousand part-time observers all over the ountry. They have just published the results of an inquiry into the state of mind of ne masses since the war began. They maintain, quite rightly, that in this war the home ront is as important as the military front ; and that it is by no means certain that the nind of the people is what the leaders of the nation suppose it to be—or rather, that certainly is not. I am not competent to assess the value of the results or the validity f the methods. But I am sure that the idea is sound and a lot of interesting information as been collected. The title of the volume is *War Begins at Home* (Chatto and Vindus) and the price is 9s. 6d. I give the price to save the cost of postage to those who ould otherwise write and tell me that I ought to have done so. But you must not ake this as a recommendation to sell your overcoat or boots in order to buy it. You can oubtless procure it from a library.

The book interests me because, though we have no such systematic means of enquiry t our disposal, I have been getting a good deal of information from our members—ot so much about the attitude of people to the war, though there is a good deal of that lso, as about their spiritual condition. This is quite as important as news about xternal events, since changes in the minds of people determine in the end the pattern f events.

The correspondence leaves in my mind three searching questions.

## ARE WE CAPABLE OF DEMOCRACY?

This question is the burden of a letter from a man in the early thirties who has ide experience of adult education, and whom I know to be an acute observer. He rites :—

" I have been spending the last few days in a state of despair at the reaction of eople in the three counties which I know best to the problems of to-day. At the eginning of the war most people awoke from their habitual lethargy, and it appeared s though there might be some kind of civic revival. Lately, I fear, habit has conquered ne spirit of adventure. The approach to the war is changing. The common attitude is ne of apathy and cynicism. It will not interfere with the prosecution of the war, but will render impossible any kind of intelligent reconstruction after victory.

" We are fighting a war in defence of a conception of self-government, and the eople of England have little idea of governing themselves beyond grousing at things ney dislike. Now that their spirit has been stirred is the time to do something about

it. The war will exhaust their energy, their initiative and their limited sense of social responsibility.

"It is not sufficient to ask people to make sacrifices for the cause of freedom and Christian democracy; you must communicate to them a passion strong enough to conquer their present apathy to direct action. If only we could make people see that their salvation lies not in experts doing everything, but in their own active participation. Most people have lost the passion to mould their own destiny. Instead they look to the Church to save them and the society in which they live without their needing to do anything, or even to believe in the Church. It is the same passive attitude which leaves everything to the expert, even thinking.

"A few people are aware of the problems facing us, but most do not want to think. I heard as a damning criticism of one of the popular series of talks given by the B.B.C. that the listener had to think about the subject after it was all over. A member of one of our education classes objected to T. S. Eliot because you had to think to understand him. 'We do not want to think; we are much too busy'."

A letter from a professor in a Scottish University contains some reflections on the mood of scepticism which he finds common among his students. He writes:—

"There is a bewildered sense that the war has come upon them like an evil fate which they do not understand. They have grown up just in time to inherit this terrible thing, and they are prepared to go through with it if they must; but it is all mad, and they do not understand it. It brings a sense of futility—will it lead to anything? Some are asking that question no doubt in a responsible and tragic spirit, but I think a good many are asking it in a spirit of scepticism.

"Is this attitude characteristic of the student body throughout the country? And is it equally characteristic of non-student youth to-day? How are we to understand it? Is it something about which we ought to be greatly concerned? Is it an attitude from which we older people who experienced the last war ought to learn something?"

## WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

This question, which is in the minds of very many, is put in the following letter from a young friend of mine who, in a few months' time, will be called up for military service:—

"My father was able to send me to a boarding school and to Cambridge. When I left the university there was sufficient money during a period of unemployment to keep me from starvation. Thus far I am indebted to the system which has now involved us in war. But I also see round me young men of my age whose fathers were not so fortunate as mine, with the transparent pinkness of starvation in their faces and the desolation of despair in their eyes. For what are they indebted to the system?

"This is the system that is asking me to fight for it. We are commanded to protect a form of democracy that has no courageous intention of reorganising our country to give equal opportunities to all. The better-off and the poorer fight side by side for what our statesmen believe to be a common Christian cause. This involves the former in the defence of a system which is unjust to the latter. The reform of the whole economic system, so that the underfed and workless may not again be exposed to the tortures of pre-war conditions, remains in the region of fanciful imagination.

"Apart from other considerations I cannot be a pacifist when I see my contemporaries facing danger. I feel loyalty to them. To a state which would guarantee complete internal reorganisation consistent with the essential principles of Christianity

ould give my loyalty. But to a state which offers me merely the negative aim of war thout a single concrete peace aim I can offer nothing but my body.

" My generation is in revolt against the present shilly-shallying over making the cision to revolutionise and reform the state, which sooner or later will have to be ade. Our morale is bad, for we see in this war no God-given cause. How can we be sured that we are fighting to effect the birth of a reorganised Britain? This is the onised cry of the younger generation."

## HAT CAN WE DO?

Mr. Middleton Murry tells me that in the hundreds of letters which reached him ter his recent broadcast talks (to be published in the C.N.-L. books under the title *urope in Travail*) the recurring request was, " Tell us what we can do." The same need nds expression in a letter from one of our members who is a consulting physician in e north of England:

" I fear that there has been too much spiritual judgment about the sickness of the orld, without deeds. The local church is not going to do anything much in the way acting midwife to the inevitable new world. It is the common soldier's fight and itiative in the Christian warfare which needs emphasis now.

" So many people whom I meet in my own circle outside the organised Christian hurch know that the world is very sick, and many of them have a fair idea of the reason hy; but they do not know where they can put their shoulders and shove with any hope being effective."

I want the News-Letter to give the largest help that it can in finding the answer the vital question of what we can do. It will have our constant attention. In the eantime Miss Dorothy L. Sayers has given us an important clue in the title of her last ook, *Begin Here* (Gollancz, 7s. 6d.). We must not push the future away into the ture. We must begin to shape it now, and we must start where we are.

Widespread initiative is essential to democracy. Where the democratic spirit is ive, people do not wait to be told what to do, but get to work on the job nearest hand.

To boil the thing down to tin tacks, as a former eminent and practically minded atesman is reported to have been in the habit of saying, if God is alive there is no eed to be inhibited by the fact that we cannot see more than a few yards ahead. When e have sincerely offered our lives to Him, he will show us either at once, or as the eeks or months pass, what we can do. When the light comes, let us act on it without elay, with all our might and without looking back. The next steps will be made clear hen the time comes.

It is undoubtedly the business of some people to think about a world order. But or most of us excessive occupation with the blue-prints of an ideal world is a form f futurism which is an escape from present and immediate duty. An acre or two of olid earth, reclaimed from the desert or jungle, and well dug and watered, is worth a housand imaginary paradises.

Perhaps the most fruitful thing that we can do is to learn to pray. I am thinking f that deeper experience of prayer in which eager and watchful expectancy becomes a abitual attitude pervading our sub-conscious as well as our conscious life. Our spiritual itality is not strong enough to overcome the demonic forces at work in the world, or to neet the vast demands of creating a better society. Where can we look for re-invigora-ion except to an invasion of our lives by the spiritual powers of the unseen world? The first necessity is to open our being to the eternal source of Light and Life and Love. " This is the work of God that ye *believe*."

## EDUCATION FOR A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

To have faced the three foregoing questions is a good preparation for the Supplement. It is directed to the crucial question raised in Supplement No. 14 of the kind of society which we want and expect. It gives to that question a most challenging answer. In the eyes of many who know the world as it is the answer must seem quite mad. I doubt whether we have really understood the world in which we are living and the forces to be reckoned with if we have not inwardly recoiled from the idea of a new Christendom as a foolhardy adventure. When I ventilated the idea more than a year ago in a letter to *The Times,* which Mr. Eliot has done me the honour of quoting, I said that I wrote as a fool. I still feel that way about it. But I see nothing else to aim at.

The theme of Supplement No. 14 was that you can have a free society only if you prepare its future citizens for life in such a society. Similarly the present Supplement leads up to the conclusion that we can have and maintain a Christian society only by the Christian education of its members. Both are in agreement that the ultimate aim and real purpose of a society may be known by the provision it makes for the preparation of its future citizens.

A recent leading article in *The Times* on "Religion and National Life" has aroused widespread interest and has been reprinted as a leaflet. It deals with the provision of Christian teaching in the schools—a subject of the highest importance. But this is only one aspect of the large issues which are opened up in this week's Supplement; and there is a danger, as the correspondence which has followed shows, that people may be misled into seeking too easy a remedy for the sickness of modern society. The Christian faith is the ground of all our hopes; but Christian teaching loses its vital meaning if it is divorced from the social aims and practice of the society in which those who receive it have to live. Christian education and a Christian society belong together. A letter from the Bishop of St. Albans appears to suggest that the Christian purpose can be achieved by imitating the methods of Stalin and Hitler in imposing authoratively a particular creed on the whole community. I cannot think that this is his real intention, since it would be a denial both of the nature of a Christian society and of the method by which we can advance towards it.

We are only making a beginning in the News-Letter in dealing with this vast theme. The questions that have been raised must be probed more deeply and will be followed up with vigour.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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# THE IDEA OF A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

I have been waiting for some time to draw ttention to Mr. T. S. Eliot's book, *The Idea of a Christian Society,* published last utumn. Many readers of the News-Letter vill already have read it for themselves. But what it contains is so relevant to the entral interest of the News-Letter that it ought to be brought to the notice of those who have not.

The importance of the slim volume bearng this title is out of all proportion to its ize. In less than a hundred pages, only wo-thirds of which are occupied with the nain text, Mr. T. S. Eliot has given us a work of unusual originality and power. It as already had the rare effect of giving a perceptible direction to Christian thought. No one can in the future discuss the quesion of a more Christian order of society vithout taking account of what Mr. Eliot has aid.

This is due, at least in part, to his care nd exactness in the use of terms. He nodestly disclaims the qualification of proound scholarship; but suggests, very rightly, hat it may be some compensation that the practice of poetry trains the mind in the valuble habit of analysing the meaning of words. So thick a fog of vagueness and sentiment nvelops much of the talk about a Christian society that we cannot be too rateful for Mr. Eliot's clear distinctions and precise and measured statements.

## THE URGENCY OF THE ISSUE

The book is not addressed to everyone. There is one class of person to whom Mr. Eliot knows that he speaks in vain. It is, unfortunately, a very large class, and one nto which all of us through natural sloth at imes fall. It is the class of those who cannot believe that things will ever be very different rom what they are at the moment.

The prevalence of this state of mind makes one wonder whether we must wait for destruction from the air or a complete economic upheaval to arouse us from our complacency. One of the lessons which Professor Arnold Toynbee draws from his survey of the history of civilisations is that no more than an individual can a nation or civilisation afford to rest on its oars. Life is a continuous adaptation to environment, and a people's greatest and proudest achievements may in a changed environment become their prison or their grave. Only a fresh response to every new challenge can save a civilisation from breakdown.

It needs an attentive reader to perceive beneath the terse, restrained exposition the writer's ever-present sense of the urgency of the questions with which he is dealing. It was not an academic interest that prompted the writing of the book. Mr. Eliot was moved to undertake it by a profound shock to his moral nature in September, 1938. There was raised in his mind a fundamental doubt about the soundness of our present civilisation. Was this society, so confident of itself and its achievements, living in fact by any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?

## IS OUR SOCIETY CHRISTIAN OR PAGAN?

There have come into existence in what was once known as Christendom new pagan societies. It may be questioned whether "pagan" is the right designation for societies that have once known, and have consciously rejected, the Christian faith. But for our present purpose the term may pass. What of our own society in this country? Has it also become pagan? To describe ourselves as a Christian society in contrast with

Russia or Germany is, in Mr. Eliot's view, an abuse of terms. It conceals the real values by which we live. Our aims, no less than those of other countries, are materialistic.

But the people in this country have certainly not yet deliberately repudiated the Christian tradition, and it may be held that a society has not ceased to be Christian until it has become positively something else. What we have at present is a culture that is mainly negative, though so far as it is positive it is still Christian. When Mr. Eliot speaks of the "idea" of a society, he means its ultimate aim. It would be difficult to say of our present society that it has any clearly conceived aim. Owing to this negative condition we have no commanding ideas, Mr. Eliot perceived, to oppose to the positive pagan systems which confronted us. We could not match conviction with conviction.

## THE NECESSITY OF CHOICE

It is clear, moreover, that to remain in this neutral condition is impossible. We must move towards the formation of a new Christian culture or accept a pagan one. Either decision will involve radical changes. The cost of achieving a Christian society is too high to make the undertaking attractive to many. Mr. Eliot doubts whether any scheme for change can be made palatable until things have become desperate. The effort of creating a Christian society will certainly involve discipline, inconvenience, and discomfort. But purgatory is preferable to hell. If men had the imagination to foresee the consequences of the choice, the majority might prefer Christianity.

The choice has got to be made. We are coming to see with growing clearness how difficult it is to live a Christian life in a non-Christian society — even in our present society which has not yet finally made up its mind. We are entangled in a network of institutions, and if these operate in an un-Christian way we are implicated against our will. Under this continuous pressure we are being de-Christianised more rapidly than we are aware.

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN SOCIETY?

This clearly is the crucial question. Mr. Eliot's answer is not very full or explicit but his intention is, I think, plain. He does not mean a society in which the term Christian is used vaguely and loosely to describe any behaviour that conforms to general standards of decency; nor one in which the attempt is made occasionally in moments of emergency to apply Christian principles to particular political situations. Nor, again, does the name imply that the society is composed wholly, or even mainly, of devout Christians; that is not something that history and experience give us any ground for expecting.

A Christian society, moreover, cannot be created by the methods of emotional revivalism. The effect of a campaign for moral re-armament in a secularised society can only be to strengthen secular values. It is not enthusiasm but dogma that differentiates a Christian from a pagan society. That is Mr. Eliot's clear-cut answer to much loose talk that is common to-day.

He does not, I take it, mean to decry enthusiasm. He would not quarrel with Sir John Seeley's contention that all other faults or deficiencies Christ could tolerate, but he could have neither part nor lot with men destitute of enthusiasm; nor with Edmund Burke's reminder that strong passions awaken the faculties, inasmch as they suffer not a particle of the man to be lost. What Mr. Eliot asserts is that enthusiasm can do little good, and may do much harm, unless it is evoked by, and directed to, the right object. The reference to dogma I take to mean that a Christian society is one which orders its affairs in the light of an understanding of man and of a scale of values derived from central Christian beliefs.

It is not part of Mr. Eliot's purpose to consider the changes in industry and social institutions which the acceptance of the Christian view of life would bring about. But he is certain that its acceptance would involve radical changes in these spheres, and he would regard such reforms as the test of the extent to which a society could justly be described as Christian. A Christian society, he says in another place, would be one in which the natural end of man—virtue and well-being in community—is acknowledged for all, and the supernatural end for all who have eyes to see it.

The meaning will become clearer if we nsider the three elements of a Christian ciety which Mr. Eliot calls the Christian ate, the Christian Community and the mmunity of Christians.

## HE CHRISTIAN STATE

The Christian State is the Christian ciety under the aspect of legislation, public ministration, legal tradition and form. It not tied to any particular form of govern-ent, but may assume any form that is suit-le to a Christian society. It is not implied a Christian State that the rulers are osen because of their qualifications as ristians. The matter of central importance not their personal adhesion to Christianity t the fact that they would be expected to t within a framework of Christian prin-ples. They would have received a Christian ucation, through which they would have arned to think in Christian categories, and now the standards to which they were ex-ected by the temper and traditions of the eople to conform. They might often com-it un-Christian acts, but they would not be llowed to defend their actions on un-hristian principles. A society is better rved by a sceptical or indifferent statesman orking within a Christian frame than by a evout statesman who is compelled to con-orm to a secular frame.

## HE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

For the great majority of the members of he Christian society which Mr. Eliot has in iew religion would be largely a matter of ehaviour and habit. Both their religious bservances and their social conduct would e determined in the main by custom and radition rather than by a conscious faith. The way of life to which they were expected o conform, that is to say, would be one that vas in harmony with the Christian under-tanding of the ends of life and a Christian order of values.

It is to this point in the presentation that criticism has been chiefly directed. It is sug-gested that Mr. Eliot ignores the need for conversion, and that his Christian society fails to embody the uncompromising demands which Christianity must always make if it is to remain true to itself.

This charge, however, would seem to be based on a misunderstanding. Mr. Eliot is not at this point speaking about the Church or about those who accept the full obligations of membership of the Church. He is speaking of society as a whole, and the question to which he seeks an answer is what is the minimum requirement that would justify us in calling a society Christian. He accepts the fact of experience that the majority of men in any society are largely governed by custom and that those who live a conscious Christian life are a small minority; and he maintains that, in spite of this, a society might properly be called Christian if it contains as a leaven a body of convinced and committed Christians, and if this leaven has so far penetrated its life in such a way that what is ordinarily expected from people accords in a broad sense with Christian standards.

The difficulty might perhaps not have arisen if Mr. Eliot had followed a different order and dealt with the Church and the Community of Christians before describing the Christian Community; but his subject, after all, was the idea of a Christian *society*.

He recognises that if there is to be a Christian society at all, the great mass of humanity must in some sense become adapted to it, and that in this process Christianity will inevitably have also become adapted to the mass. A society in which all professed themselves Christians might consequently be a society on a low level. But against this danger there is, and can be, no protection except the vigour of the Christian life. If the salt has lost its savour, wherewith can it be salted?

## THE COMMUNITY OF CHRISTIANS

Herein lies the importance of the third essential element in a Christian society, which Mr. Eliot calls the Community of Christians. This is not the same as the membership of the Church. What Mr. Eliot is seeking for is some term to describe that element among Christians which operates as a creative and educative force in society. His Community of Christians is a body, somewhat indistinct in its boundaries, of conscious, thoughtful and practising Christians, possessing spiritual and intellectual gifts beyond the ordinary, which enable them to exert a formative influence on social

life. It would include both clergy and laity, and its function would be through its spiritual and intellectual grasp of Christian truth to leaven the life of society with Christian ideas and values.

## THE CHURCH

None of the three elements that have been mentioned is identical with the Church. There cannot be a Christian society without a Church, which is at one and the same time national, in the sense that it *aims* at comprehending the whole nation, and also part of the universal Church. The dual loyalty to the nation and to the universal Church creates a tension, but this tension is essential to the idea of a Christian society. The Church will be the final authority within the nation in all matters of faith and morals.

The Church would have relations to each of the three elements already considered. Through its official leaders it would have relations with the State. It might at times be in conflict with the State. It would be its duty to protest, when the need arises, against un-Christian policies or immoral legislation or the infringement of spiritual liberty. Through its parochial and other organisations it would be in contact with the smallest units and the individual members of the Christian Community. And through its scholars and intellectual leaders it would have close links with the Community of Christians.

## EDUCATION

A Christian society requires a system of education in harmony with its ultimate aim. A nation's system of education is much more important than its system of government. Education in the sense here intended, means, of course, much more than the acquisition of information and technical competence. It must impart a coherent view of life. It presupposes, that is to say, a social philosophy —a definite doctrine of man and of society. This does not mean that the members of the teaching profession, any more than the rulers of the State, must necessarily be professing Christians. It means that they will work within an educational system that has been formed in accordance with Christian presuppositions regarding the ends of life.

J. H. O.

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